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ABSTRACT

The preliminary plan for the proposed National Institute of Education (NIE) is outlined. The author discusses a conflict of interests and pressure between Congress and the educational community which seriously hampered confidence in the Office of Education's R&D program, and suggests that the NIE, to avoid this problem, must establish priorities to deal with multiple demands and policy to deal with conflicting ones. Because the pluralistic nature of educational goals will keep the Institute's efforts in the political limelight, the author recommends that the NIE should respond to Congressional concerns about education, but that it should not react to every political whim. Finally, the pluralism of theory and methodology, of conception and approach, in the independent research community and academia is discussed. The author feels that the NIE must seek a middle ground with an R&Dprogram that is "targeted" in its delineation of problem areas but not so "directed" that it impedes prospective contractors in their development of innovative and adaptive approaches to problems. (AG)

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RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

PROBLEMS OF PLURALISM AND POLITICS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT: COMMENTS ON THE PRELIMINARY PLAN FOR THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Problems of Pluralism and Politics in Educational Research and Development: Comments on the Preliminary Plan for the National Institute of Education[1]

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The preliminary plan for the proposed National Institute of Education (Levien, 1971) offers a stimulating conception of what an NIE might come to be. The plan outlines a challenging initial program for the Institute whereby it would attempt to move ahead on four fronts simultaneously and would develop and maintain a workable balance between short-term and long-term concerns. That is, by the proposed plan the Institute would not only directly attack the urgent and recurrent educational problems of the times, but would also sponsor research-and-development activities to advance educational practice, would facilitate the formation of a strong R & D system having effective links between research-and-development, manpower training, and field application, and would also engage in and support basic research on the scientific foundations of education. This combination of action research-and-development on the one hand with basic inquiry on the other is seen as being absolutely essential for the accomplishment of short-range impact and long-range viability.

The plan also proposes an insightful organizational structure for the Institute that recognizes that basic research and large-scale development activities require different modes of specification, staffing, and management; it wisely institutionalizes these differences into separate Directorates and Divisions. Such a structure should not only facilitate the operation of different administrative styles for the different missions, but should also tend

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[1]These comments were delivered as part of a Symposium on "Perspectives on Recent Research," at the American Educational Research Association meetings in New York City, February 1971. I gratefully acknowledge the many stimulating contributions of Melvin Tumin to my thinking on this topic.

to preserve the integrity of each component from a natural tendency to assimilate one to the other. In particular, this structural separation may serve the important function of protecting basic research from continual threats to divert it and its resources wholly into action research on immediate pressing problems. This structure also entails some potential weaknesses, however, for basic research thinking and personnel should not just be protectively nurtured--they should be insistently implicated as well in the planning, conduct, and evaluation of action and development programs. This dual requirement of both involvement and independence creates inevitable tensions and conflicts, with attendant problems of coordination and communication. However, the proposed solution of the NIE planners promises to be reasonably effective on this score--namely, the utilization overall of a matrix organization in which staff members of one Directorate or Division would be expected to work part of their time on project teams of other Directorates or Division.

It seems clear at this point (and it is repeatedly underscored in the planning document) that such an ambitious program cannot be successfully mounted without a staff having both continuity and competence. Accordingly, the preliminary plan and the pending Congressional legislation include several provisions that should both increase the likelihood of continuity in the face of changing political pressures and make it easier to recruit and retain high-level personnel. Implicit in the entire enterprise of a National Institute, however, is the notion that we must try something new and perceptibly different, as opposed, for example, to shoring up the present research machinery within the Office of Education by increasing its continuity and competence.

The need for a new beginning for educational research-and-development on the national scene has been drawn pointedly and bluntly by Gallagher (1970), and the reasons he puts forth should be examined carefully by the architects of the new Institute so that the old pitfalls may be avoided. His basic point is that there has developed over the years such a profound lack of confidence in the ability of the existing OE research organization to administer effectively any new programs or expanded resources that we simply must start anew. This erosion of confidence on the part of Congress and of the educational community broadly is traced to an unfortunate conflict of pressures. In responding to these pressures, the Office of Education succeeded in offending two major bodies of critics--one, the scholarly community, especially behavioral and social scientists, who decried their lack of involvement in both the planning and execution of OE research programs and were quick to criticize them for their consequent lack of rigor; the other, a variety of user interests in education who felt that the OE Research and Development Program was too influenced by researchers as opposed to practitioners and consequently was not practical enough or sufficiently productive of noticeable differences in the schools.

Thus, the Office of Education research program was caught between the pressures of conflicting interests, and it faltered. But those conflicting pressures are real and still operating, and it is a gross oversimplification to view them as a single polarity between research and user interests. There are a multiplicity of interests in the educational arena stemming primarily from an underlying pluralism of values. These interests in turn produce multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives that education must simultaneously serve. Why should we expect a National Institute to fare any better than the

Office of Education in dealing with these pressures? The answer is, "We shouldn't!"--unless we recognize the source and power of these pressures and incorporate within the plans for the National Institute adequate provision for the continuous monitoring and resolution of these forces. The basic problem is that multiple and competing demands arising from a pluralism of values are, in a pluralistic society, all legitimate candidates for the attention and resources of a National Institute. Given limited resources, however, the National Institute will be forced to establish priorities to deal with multiple demands and policy to deal with conflicting ones. The critical point here is that, since all of these demands are legitimate, the priorities and policies must be repeatedly examined and their consequences continuously evaluated in a sufficiently participatory fashion that we avoid crystallizing different constituencies into hostile camps and we keep the pluralistic dialogue open. This is no mean feat, to be sure, but it must be attempted, for these multiple pressures are not only social realities but political realities and a National Institute of Education will be highly visible politically.

One mechanism for openly confronting these divergent viewpoints is already built into the proposed structure of the Institute--and that is a heavy reliance upon representative advisory groups at all levels of policy planning and program functioning. But the issue is so critical that in addition it should be given a major focus at the highest level by incorporating this concern as one of the Institute's prime objectives. That is, one of the major purposes of the National Institute of Education should be to undertake a continuing re-examination and clarification of the social goals of American education and attempt to illuminate the relationship between these goals and underlying

social values. Such intensive examination is urgently required if we are to penetrate the rhetoric of current goal statements in order to formulate workable procedures for goal attainment. Take, for example, a goal as universally endorsed as "equality of educational opportunity." What does that mean? Does it mean developing an educational system that will produce equality of outcome or condition? Or, if we grant that individual differences in condition will likely always exist, does it mean developing an educational system that will at least not perpetuate existing inequities?--for example, by producing levels of outcome that are not correlated with prior conditions such as parents' socioeconomic status or with invidious distinctions such as race or sex.

Incidentally, some observers may hope that a National Institute of Education would avoid much of this controversy by maintaining a low profile politically--say, at least at the level of the National Institutes of Health. There would appear to be little hope for this, however, primarily because the pluralistic nature of educational goals will inevitably keep the Institute's efforts constantly in the political limelight. There is very little pluralism with respect to national health goals--about the desirability of mental health or of a cure for cancer. Whatever controversy there is revolves about means and resources, rarely about ends. And concern about ends is the heart of the political process. But this political centrality of a National Institute of Education is not all liability. The Institute will be politically vulnerable, to be sure, but the same spotlight that heightens influenceability may produce as well a substantial influence in its own right for the shaping of national priorities, particularly if the Institute is successful in pursuing long-range goals that embody our aspirations as opposed to short-range goals of solely political appeal. To do this will require a delicate balance of responsiveness

and perseverance. The National Institute will have to respond to political firebells when they ring, for it will be on the firing line with respect to Congressional concerns about education. But it must not react to every political cowbell that rings, for a slavish responsiveness to changing political winds would introduce its own kind of insidious discontinuity.

If it is to be truly effective, there is yet another kind of pluralism the National Institute must be sensitive to--and that is a pluralism of theory and methodology, of conception and approach, in the independent research community and academia. Since the bulk of the National Institute's programs will be carried out by external agencies, it makes a big difference how these agencies are implicated in the process. It is anticipated that basic research activities will be largely specified by the scientist who is to perform them with little detailed guidance from the funding agency, but that large-scale development activities will be specified by groups representative of the eventual users as well as the developer and carried out under much closer scrutiny by the funding agency. Thus, much of the research-and-development activity will be of a type that has come to be called "targeted or directed R & D." The question here is, "How directed will it be?" Although it is imperative that the NIE staff participate actively in the process of formulating problems and approaches to their solution rather than merely responding to proposals from the educational and R & D communities, it is likewise imperative that the educational research community not be relegated solely to the role of purveyer of services in response to rigidly specified requests for proposals. The NIE must seek a middle ground with a research and development program that is "targeted" in its delineation of problem areas but not so "directed" that it hamstrings prospective contractors in their development

of innovative and adaptive approaches to the problems. In this way the National Institute would serve not only to support important independent research but also to invigorate and extend the research community, capitalizing upon its pluralism in theory and methodology to maximize the impact of research and development in American education.

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